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SUICIDE AMONG PRIMITIVE PEOPLES.

BY S. R. STEINMETZ.

It is the opinion of many sociologists, who perhaps have not given especial thought or study to the subject, that the act of self-destruction is infrequent among savage peoples. The purpose of my inquiry is to determine whether this opinion has the support of well-authenticated facts, and, if so, to what degree.

Von Oettingen (*Die Moral Statistik*, p. 762) remarks, that among torpid savages, as among the lower animals, suicide is said to be altogether unheard of. Corre, in his study of crime and suicide (*Crime et Suicide*, p. 349), is of the opinion that insanity and suicide increase in the ratio of the civilization of the races. Morselli (*Il Suicidio*, p. 205) expresses the same opinion, and adds the following statement of the motives of suicide among savages: *I popoli selvaggi non si suicidano se non per fame, come gli Australiani, Fuegiani ed Ottentotti, o per fanatismo, come gli Eschimesi, i Bengalesi e Giapponesi, gli Indiani e gli Incas, e gli indegeni del Malabar,*" etc. Unfortunately my collection of ethnological material, at the moment, does not include the African races, nor the primitive tribes of British India. In the second volume of my "*Ethnologische Studien zur ersten Entwicklung der Strafe*" is included my investigations of many other races of mankind.

I have been able to collect forty-two positive and three negative instances of suicide among primitive peoples, which are distributed as follows:

Polar peoples, 5; North American Indians, 14; South American Indians, 2; Bedouins, 2; peoples of the Caucasus, 3; native races of British India, 2; Melanesians, 4. (Codrington speaks generally of all the peoples he treats of in his work.) Micronesians, 2; Polynesians, 4; Indonesians, 5. The motives or the inducements to suicide are very varied. Among them I find the quasi-voluntary act of the aged, too often the result of a concealed coercion.

Crantz (*History of Greenland*, pp. 166–194) mentions the instances of an old woman in Greenland, who, growing burdensome to herself and others, is coerced to throw herself into the sea to escape being buried; and of another who destroyed herself for fear of the accusation of sorcery, which is always followed by execution unless fortunately defended by some man of arms.

Nansen (*First Crossing of Greenland*, II, 330) relates that on the east coast of Greenland old men were killed by their friends or committed suicide.

The Athka Aleutians often destroyed themselves upon the death of a relative, but children were never known to commit suicide upon the death of their parents, although this was regarded as law.

Self-destruction among these people is also caused by shame; when an enterprise fails suicide is sometimes preferred to captivity or slavery. (Ivan Petroff: *Report on the Population, &c., of Alaska*, Tenth Census of United States, VIII, 158, 1884.)

Weniaminow (*Charakterzüge der Aleuten von den Fuchsin-seln*) asserts that among the Aleutians of the Fox islands suicide is quite unknown; but as these Aleutians are closely related to the Athka Aleutians, the statement is quite curious and almost incredible, and becomes more so when contrasted with that of Klemm (*Allgemeine Culturgeschichte der Menschheit*, II, 201, 202, 1843), who says that “by threats the Kamtschadals and the Aleutians are brought to desperation and to suicide, to which they are extraordinarily inclined. . . . The easiest death is by drowning, which is preferred to hanging, and death by the knife. . . . So much are these people inclined to suicide that they kill themselves simply because they are old and invalid. . . . When Sarytschew traveled with Aleutians and they lost the hope of ever returning to their homes, one of them cut his throat;” and “formerly many when becoming ill begged to be thrown to the dogs while still living.”

These statements of Klemm are very formal, the only authority given being Sarytschew; but because of the close racial connection existing between all Aleutians, and of the close agreement of these statements with those of Petroff, I am inclined to give to them greater credence than to the statements of Weniaminow. Besides, and in addition, I find what Klemm com-

municated related in Steller's work (*Beschreibung von dem Lande Kamtschatka*, pp. 264, 273, 354) and in Kohn and Andrees, viz., that "the Kamtschadals regard suicide as allowable and even praiseworthy." They kill themselves for the least threat or scolding, and the incurable sick starve themselves to death. The motive for self-destruction is also often a great desire for the life eternal.

From Hall (*Life with the Esquimaux*, II, 101, 317) we learn that a Frobisher Bay Inuit woman killed herself, although she had a dependent daughter and believed that suicide is punished by the torments of hell.

Hearne (*Landreis naar den Noorder Ocean*, II, 186) relates that Matonabee, a chief of the "North Indians," as he calls them, whom he praises as a most noble man, killed himself on hearing that the French had destroyed the English fortress where he had received his education, and adds that "no other Indian ever killed himself."

Among the Dakotas we learn that suicide is a common resort after every disappointment. In every season girls hang themselves because of jealousy or from fear of marriage to those whom they do not love. A beautiful instance of this kind of "love suicide" is contained in the well-known story of Winona (Mary Eastman, *Dahcotah*, 89, 169): "Among the Omahas the suicide of women for unrequited love is quite common." (*Vide* E. James' *Account of an Expedition from Pittsburg to the Rocky Mountains*, etc.)

The Mandan women sometimes kill themselves in despair from brutal treatment by their husbands and sons, and suicide for love or offended honor is not uncommon. The Chippewas never kill their old parents, but sometimes these abandon themselves to death. (Prinz zu Wied: "*Reise in das innere Nord Amerika*;" and Peter Jones: "*History of the Ojibbeway Indians*.") Keating, in his *Narrative of Long's Expedition* (I, 410, 411, 1825), assures us that suicide among the men of this tribe is not common, but occurs sometimes from disappointment or from shame after capture. Among the women it is much more frequent from the motives of jealousy, disappointed love, or loss of children. Public opinion regards suicide as foolish but not reprehensible, as in the future life it will not be punished.

Charlevoix (*Histoire de la Nouvelle France*, III, 327, 1744) gives us an instance of a Huron maiden who killed herself because her mother reprimanded her; we learn from Gibbs (*Contributions to N. A. Eth.*, I, 198) that among the tribes of western Washington and northwestern Oregon many women commit suicide from passionate sensual love at the death of their lovers; and from Lombroso (*L'Uomo delinquente*, p. 51, 1884) that the Creeks kill themselves after the slightest disappointment.

The Hidatsa believe that the self-murderer will live isolated in the future life, but will not be less well treated (Matthews "Ethnography and Philology of the Hidatsa Indians," p. 49, 1877).

"The women of the Talkotin of the Columbia river appear to be subject to depression of spirits arising either from sickness or from excessive labor, under the influence of which many commit suicide." (Staniland Wake, *Evolution of Morality*, I, 238.)

I will conclude my collection of North American examples by citing Th. Waitz (*Anthropologie der Naturvölker*, III, 102, 103), who says that "in the country of the Muskogee there is a 'lovers' leap,' a cliff from which two pursued, unhappy lovers once threw themselves into the river," and quotes Heckewelder and Tanner, who give instances of suicide by girls for unrequited love, and also by men from the same motive. According to Bossu, the self-murderer in southern Alabama is denied burial and is despised as a coward. Among the Cherokees suicide for grief caused by the disfigurement of small-pox was very frequent, and among other motives are found great calamities or losses, love, grief, and jealousy. An instance is given of a woman who drowned herself and children in the falls of St. Anthony because her husband took another wife.

Passing to South America, Waitz recalls the celebrated case of the South American Indian woman who, to escape falling into the hands of the Spanish, killed herself upon the grave of her lover, and whose sad and romantic fate has been immortalized in the verse of Del Bareo Centenera, and adds that among the Knisteneaux (Cree) it often happens that a wife sacrifices herself at the grave of her husband. Personally I have as yet been able to find but one instance of the practice of self-destruction in South America, that mentioned by Ochsenius (*Chile, Land und Leute*, 119, 1884) of the Araucanian girls who, when married against their wishes, hang themselves in the wood.

At a great distance from Chile, among the Bedouins of Arabia, Burckhardt (*Notes on the Bedouins*, I, 279, 1831) reports a similar motive for suicide. Among the "Cheusurs" of the Caucasus only pregnant unmarried girls kill themselves, for the infamy is great, as the girls are generally most chaste, and the unhappy woman hangs or shoots herself. (*Die Cheusuren und ihr Land*, p. 88.)

Mr. Bell, in his "*Journal of a Residence in Circassia*" (II, 25, 1841), tells us of a Circassian slave who, on being betrothed against her will, killed herself, and Klemm (*loc. cit.*, IV, 80) relates how the Circassian, surrounded by Cossacks and unable to escape, will run his yatagân into his breast.

In "*Le Droit Pénal de la République Athénienne*" (pp. 254-'5, 1875) we are informed that the Greeks cut off the hand of the self-murderer and buried it separately, as it was the instrument of a crime against the gods and the commonwealth.

Among the ancient Germans, on the contrary, suicide was not uncommon and was considered as the deed of a courageous and free spirit that brought the hero to Walhalla, while debilitated and very old men, who thought themselves useless in the world, often sought their death. (Fr. von Löher: *Kulturgeschichte der Deutschen in Mittelalter II*, p. 241-'2.)

Among the Jews, says S. Mayer (*Geschichte der Strafrechte*, 197 et seq., 1876), suicide was thought to be punished by God.

Upon the general subject Kovalevsky, in his latest work, remarks as follows: "*Le suicide est regardé par quelques législations et la nôtre est de ce nombre, comme un délit particulier. Cette manière de l'envisager conduit à la mutilation des cadavres, on leur coupe souvent la main droite. Quelques législations anciennes, le droit Grec par exemple, en font foi. Lorsqu'il n'y a qu'une simple tentative et que le suicide n'a pas réussi on limite parfois les droits civils du coupable. Les Ossètes n'admettent pas ces principes, regardant le suicide comme un péché, ils se contentent d'ensevelir les suicidés loin des autres défunts, mais ils ne profanent ni leurs cadavres ni leurs tombes. Le plus qu'ils font c'est de lui souhaiter l'enfer lorsqu'ils passent près de l'endroit où le suicide est enseveli. La tentative de suicide, comme du reste toutes les autres tentatives, n'entraîne aucune conséquence juridique pénale.*" (*Coutume Contemporaine et Loi Ancienne*, pp. 326, 327, 1893.)

Among the Burmese and Hos, and the New Hebrides, Fiji, and Kingsmill islanders suicide is well authenticated, and is caused by illness, grief, anger, jealousy, shame, humiliation, fear of captivity or misfortune, old age and disappointed love; but among the western tribes of the Torres straits and the Andamanese it is unknown.

Kubary, who certainly has the profoundest knowledge of the Pelew islands, relates that suicide occurring very rarely, is neither praised nor blamed. It is the expression of the will of a free man, and public opinion interferes with it only so far as it affects the interests of a certain family. The self-murderer is considered insane as a consequence of disappointment in love or of uncontrollable jealousy or hatred; but having died an unnatural death their spirits are feared; an honorable interment is denied their bodies, which are buried as the corpses of those who fall in war, where they ended their life." (*Die Verbrechen und das Strafverfahren auf den Pelau Inseln.*)

In New Zealand an adulterer sometimes destroys himself for fear of the consequences of his actions, and in Tahiti and Tonga suicide occurs from love and grief.

Passing to the Indomorian archipelago we encounter the curious accounts of Borneo furnished by Wilken: The self-murderer is there thought to be isolated in the future life, like the thief; those who drown themselves are condemned thenceforth to live up to their waists in water; those who poison themselves to live in houses built of poisonous woods and surrounded by the ipoh (*Antiaris toxicaria*) and other noxious plants whose benumbing evaporations are painful to the spirits. (*Het Animisme de Volken von het Maleische Ras*, pt. 1, p. 44, 1884.) The eating of ipoh is followed by horrible spasms of the whole body, ending in lockjaw and death, and is frequently used for suicide.

The practice of suicide is also authenticated among the "Dajacks of the Doesson," Moeroeng and Siang, and among the Karo Bataks the spirit of the self-destroyer is worshipped. The aborigines of Nias believe that the spirit of the self-murderer, together with the spirits of those who die a violent death, are separated in the future life, and the people of Tonapo and Tobada (Central Celebes) frequently kill themselves when surprised by their wives in adultery.

Consultation of a relatively great body of authorities show that among the Australian and wilder South American peoples suicide is unknown, but this appearance may deceive the investigator and prove an unsound basis for ethnological reasoning, because of the possible silence of the authorities upon this particular subject of inquiry.

Another impression derived will be that suicide in the next higher stage of civilization to that of the primitive peoples is not at all rare. Where it is the least rare is impossible to tell, but I am inclined to the opinion that it is most frequent among the Hyperboreans and the North American Indians.

In reviewing the causes which have led to suicide in the instances related, I find love, sorrow, and all related emotions as the motive in twenty cases, offended pride and sensibility in thirteen, fear of slavery and captivity in five, depression and melancholy because of disappointment, sickness, etc., in seven, family quarrels in four. The other motives are restricted to single cases.

The statistics of motives do not reveal any plausible theory by which the difference in the frequency of suicide in the various races occupying the same plane of culture can be explained. It is, however, interesting to observe that the motives are generally the same as those which lead to suicide in all civilized societies, quite contrary to Morselli's opinion above cited. In addition, it may be remarked that among the motives recorded offended pride seems to occur most frequently.

Regarding the moral consideration in which the act of self-destruction is held by primitive peoples, it will be observed that our information is in no sense complete.

In the instances above cited it appears that the Frobisher Bay Innuits, and Dakota peoples believe that the self-murderer after death is sent to hell; the Hidatsa believe him to be separated but not punished after death; the Chippewa that the act of self-destruction is a foolish but not reprehensible act and not punished in the future life; to the Ossetes it is a sin, and the subject is buried apart and condemned to punishment hereafter; the Karens call it cowardly and deny the self-destroyer honorable burial; to the Andamanese the act is a sin; the Pelew islanders neither praise nor blame it; the Dajacks are certain of its punishment after death, while the aborigines of Nias think

the self-murderer only isolated in the future life, together with those who die a violent death ; ancient Germans and the Kamtschadals alone considering suicide a praiseworthy act. It also appears that of the instances given, women have contributed by far the greater number.

In conclusion, it seems that a subject so interesting in itself and indicating so clearly the moral and intellectual development of the races of mankind is worthy of much more attention than is usually given to it by ethnographers, and it is a matter of regret that in so rich and suggestive a publication as the "Notes and Queries on Anthropology," by the British Anthropological Institute (ed. 1892, p. 146), there are so few questions in reference to suicide.

It seems probable from the data I have been able to collect that there is a greater propensity to suicide among savage than among civilized peoples, and that its frequency may be owing to the generally more positive faith in the future life existing in the former races which enables them to meet death with greater calmness and a slighter resistance of the instinct and other natural motives tending to conservation of life, and finally the question suggests itself that if suicide is one of the positive symptoms of moral degeneration, as Dr. Winkler suggests, is it possible that moral degeneration is taking place among the primitive peoples ?

LEYDEN, HOLLAND.
